

# AGING OUT OF FOSTER CARE...AND INTO COLLEGE

By Judge Leonard Edwards (ret.)

**B**ig things were happening in Michelle's life this past spring. She was turning 18, graduating from high school (the first person in her family to do so), and her juvenile court case would be dismissed. And Michelle was frightened.

She was frightened because she was a dependent child of the juvenile court and had been in foster care for five years. Her father was in prison and her mother had not been heard from in several years. Michelle didn't know what she was going to do with her life. When asked in court, she said she might get a job and possibly move in with her boyfriend.

Michelle is one of thousands of foster children across the country who will "age out" of foster care each year. That means their cases will be dismissed from court, there will no longer be a social worker supporting them, and they will be moving out of the foster home as funding for foster care will end. Some will return to the same parents they were removed from years ago, some will join the workforce. Most will have a difficult time. Studies show that foster youth aging out of the child welfare system are more likely than other youth to go on welfare, end up in jail, become homeless, and even have their own children removed from the same system that they came from.

This is understandable. Foster children have had little stability in their lives. Their parents have failed to provide a safe home for them, they are likely to have lived in several different homes and attended several different schools before they age out, and they probably do not have a safety net to support them when they are on their own.

Six years ago I organized a luncheon in Santa Clara County, Calif., for foster youth who were about to age out of the child welfare system. Funded by Philanthropic Ventures Foundation and attended by court personnel, attorneys, child advocates, and social workers, the luncheon featured foster youth who were in college and college representatives who could inform the youth about educational opportunities. The luncheon was a success and has been held every year since then. Four years ago San Jose State University agreed to host the luncheon on campus. Former foster youth currently attending San Jose State spoke at the luncheon and showed the foster youth around the campus.

Then something wonderful happened. San Jose State embraced the idea of helping foster youth move to higher education. The university, with help from local philanthropists, created the CME (Connect Motivate and Educate) Society, a university-wide program to support foster youth interested in college. Bringing together all segments of the university, San Jose State has been able to help foster youth apply for admission, help them with housing, assist with financial aid, and even provide mentors. The luncheon continues now with Santa Clara County Superior Court Judge Katherine Lucero leading the juvenile court efforts to ensure better outcomes for our foster youth. In the past two years, the program has expanded so that community and junior colleges are now a part of the program.

And this was only the beginning. Last year, San Jose State and the Silicon Valley Children's Fund hosted a conference bringing together over 100 community colleges to address how they can reach out to

support foster youth moving into higher education. The conference will be held again in 2008 in Santa Clara County (read more at <http://www.svcf.org/blueprint2008/savethedate/>). Additionally, I have been talking to juvenile court judges in California, and several counties have duplicated what has happened in Santa Clara County. Commissioner Charlotte Wittig in Tulare County got the ball rolling when she convened county leaders and suggested a similar project. In November, Tulare community leaders sponsored an all-day event for foster youth aging out of foster care. The conference featured Dave Pelzer (author of *A Child Called "It"*) and was well attended, including lead judges and social service representatives from neighboring Fresno and Kings counties. In Siskiyou County (a rural jurisdiction in Northern California), Judge William Davis also convened the community around the issue of foster youth aging out of foster care. The community responded with an event that brought foster youth and local colleges together. Commissioner Joyce Hinrichs in Humboldt County is going to schedule a similar event, and several other counties are considering the same. Local service clubs, particularly Rotary, have shown an interest in sponsoring these events. They realize that a small investment can have a surprisingly positive impact.

Last September, San Jose State University President Don Kassing hosted a barbecue dinner at his home for former foster youth entering the university. The new students were excited to be there with university leaders. During the evening I went over to Michelle and asked about college life. She said she was loving it. Then I asked her why she decided to go to college. She said that she had never thought of it until she went to the foster care luncheon. She made up her mind when she heard that college was possible. "You told me I could go," she said.



I believe we all have an obligation to give our children goals and to help them achieve those goals—foster children in particular. Juvenile court judges are uniquely positioned to be able to improve outcomes for foster youth. By bringing together colleges and universities with youth aging out of foster care and showing what some communities have accomplished, we can set a national agenda—that all foster youth aging out of the child welfare system have an opportunity to participate in the next level of education, whether it's completing high school, going on to trade school, or going to college. Juvenile judges can take a leadership role in bringing educational leaders together with the community to see that this happens. San Jose State has set the bar at a high level, and other institutions of higher learning may be inspired to emulate what it has done. To learn more about what San Jose State University has done, visit their website at [www.sjsu.edu/cmesociety](http://www.sjsu.edu/cmesociety). And to start your local institutions of higher learning thinking about these issues, tell them about the conference this October in San Jose, Calif.

These community events to benefit foster youth aging out of care can happen anywhere. It is a classic example of communities coming together to assist their youth to improve their chances of being successful in life. Juvenile and family court judges can be the conveners and catalysts for these events. I would like to start an electronic network so that each judge and community considering following through with a similar effort can learn from other jurisdictions around the country. I volunteer to provide that network through e-mail, at [Leonard.edwards@jud.ca.gov](mailto:Leonard.edwards@jud.ca.gov).

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Leonard Edwards is a retired Judge from Santa Clara County, Calif. He now works at the California Administrative Office of the Courts as a Judge-in-Residence.

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